

Artist: Vikram Iyengar
Performance: A Multitude of Drops

Post 1

A Multitude of Drops | India/Cyprus

In this blog we will be sharing our artistic journey on this project with our readers. Our objective is to make three-four posts over the next three months:

- 4th week of September
- 3rd week of October
- 2nd week of November

We will share snippets of our creative process and intercultural engagement with our Cypriot collaborators, as well as some content relating to our project. We encourage creative and scholarly use of our posts and ideas with acknowledgements (please credit A Multitude of Drops I Ranan India & Buffer Fringe Festival, Cyprus). Commercial use may only be made after explicit permission from both Ranan, India and Buffer Fringe Festival, Cyprus. Thank you for your understanding.

A small team comprising of Maria Hadjimichael, Vikram Iyengar, Lav Kanoi, and Vicky Long have met a few times over the last few weeks to share ideas, stories, history, and context in preparation for A Multitude of Drops at the Buffer Fringe Arts Festival. In this first post, we also share some reflections from our meetings with our Thinking Partner (Maria Hadjimichael and Klitos Papastylianou). A number of evocative impulses (distinctive to each location, but containing also common or resonant aspects across different places in India and Cyprus) have emerged from these discussions. We intend to weave these

impulses with other stories and experiences that our artists will bring to the table as well.

The Buffer Zone

One such impulse is the buffer zone itself, where this festival will be hosted. This UN-administered buffer zone separates Turkish controlled northern Cyprus from the southern Republic of Cyprus, and marks the separation of human from human because of a history of violent conflict. Furthermore, and ironically, as human use of land spaces in the buffer zone has become limited, nature has thrived. If one of the outcomes of war and human conflict is destruction and environmental destruction, in this case, the afterlife of conflict has led to a strange and ambiguous revival of nature. Is there a larger story here for all humankind? Is suffering anti-nature? On the other hand, In the Indic context, to the south and east of Kolkata there is a buffer zone of a different kind. This is not a man-made demilitarized space, but a unique natural mangrove forest that protects human civilization from the vagaries of the ocean and the tidal river delta, even while life and nature thrive in the intermediating region.



Figure 1: mangroves on Sagar Island, south Bengal Pic credit: Ranan

The Commons

A second impulse, perhaps worth mentioning here, is that of the commons. Who owns the commons, who belongs in it? Who defines the commons and subjects it to what uses? Does unregulated use of the commons always lead to tragic outcomes? How might we think of the urban commons, and its interdependencies with nature and with history and heritage, both of which can be seen in terms of the commons. When the Pedieos river flooded recently (itself a consequence of human interference and mismanagement of natural flow regimes) it not only submerged much of the old city, it also damaged a centuries-old piano. Who will play music on those strings now? Whose music is lost?



Figure 2: broken piano in European villa - click image for hyperlink

<https://www.designboom.com/art/romain-thiery-new-images-of-broken-pianos-in-european-villas-12-12-2019/>

The river, itself, is a commons - but has also been displaced and marginalised by successive human interventions. Is it staking a claim to its original and organic flow?

This piece will trace the ebbs and flows of these experiences in Cyprus and in India, grounded in the movement and metaphor of water - withdrawing to reveal bicomunal spaces, expanding to reveal spaces of nature, extending to cover human loss and human love and disappearing to leave us with our barren (or fertile?) histories.

Lav Kanoi and Vikram Iyengar
September 2020

Post 2

We are delighted to announce our full Cypriot cast for *A Multitude of Drops*.

Andreas Patsias

Antonia Filippou

Belinda Papavasileiou

Bug̃çe Bozkurt

Evie Demetriou

Lyda Karayianni

Marian Kyprianou

Marita Anastasi

Nayia T. Karacosta

O“yku” Özoğul

On Thursday, 1 October we had our first Zoom meeting with the cast. This introductory meeting was focussed on getting to know each other a little better, and sharing some personal thoughts and perspectives on environmental concerns. We were overwhelmed by the range of responses that were shared with us - personal stories and memories, Greek and English poetry, stories and poems written by our cast, original music, anecdotes and experiences of previous and current work, and brief but insightful perspectives on some of the environmental issues facing Cyprus.

Most inspiring was the deep concern and commitment that came through so clearly. Some of this came through in individual practice: the experience and methodology of landscape performance where one discovers stillness and rest; working with a Native American choreographer where movement emerges from the external sensations from the environment and what one is wearing; the action and effort of pulling buried plastic from a previously pristine beach...

Much also came through the words and phrases individuals chose to describe what they thought and felt - disarmingly simple, but devastatingly impactful.

'perhaps the trees cried for help as they were being cut, but the good citizens did not hear them...

losing a tree is like losing a friend

the world has started to change, and that terrifies me

how do I feel outside and inside nature? how do I collaborate with nature?'

Phrases like these came straight from the heart!

For our part, we shared a series of images associated with the Ganges river. The first few were of its source as a snow and glacier fed river high up in the Himalayas. Then we moved to the end of the river's journey - where she meets the sea through the largest delta system in the world in the unique Sundarbans mangrove landscape.



Gaumukh - the source of the Ganges

This awe-inspiring tidal landscape may look peaceful, but it is unpredictable and dangerous. In the network of hundreds of rivers, the tide rises up to 30 feet twice a day, drowning and revealing islands in an inexorable movement as old as time. This is the home of the Royal Bengal Tiger, the King Cobra and the Gangetic Crocodile. It is also the home of millions of people who live in one of the most densely populated, poverty-stricken, and ecologically fragile areas on earth. The fascinating mangroves are nature's defence against the tides: with their network of aerial roots they hold the soil in place preventing erosion.

But mankind knows better: in island after island these magnificent trees have been replaced with defences of concrete, brick, sandbags, and more. And in island after island, these defences have been repeatedly breached by the unstoppable waters of the rivers and the sea. The only success stories have been from areas where mangroves have been replanted as collaborative efforts between local communities, environmental agencies, and governmental departments. But even as these survive and thrive, other islands disappear forever in the swirling and rising waters.



Devastated manmade defences, Sagar island

This is very different from the Cypriot experience of rivers and water. As one of the cast said, "We can't even comprehend how water can be so dangerous". At our next meeting we will be looking at getting to know more about the Cypriot relationship with water in all its complexity - elemental, mythological, physical, psychological, visual, ecological and more.

Post 3

How can artists who have never met in person create something deeply felt and meaningful? How can one create connections separated by seas and borders and patchy internet connections? This was the challenge before us as we started work with our excellent cast of actors, dancers, and performers for the Multitude of Drops at the Buffer Fringe Arts Festival 2020.

Art transcends divides, we are told, and believe. And we see this happen as the three of us from India meet with our Cypriot friends twice a week to share and respond to text and image, visual and song, rhythm and beat, and feeling and impulse, in order to co-create a piece about climate change, experienced and expressed in water, that is grounded in social and individual experience.

There are a number of things that have to be taken into consideration: mobility, and availability. The three of us in India are, happily, in the same city, so it is easy for us to meet even as we must co-ordinate who can work in Nicosia, and who can work in Limassol. There are occasional nerve-wracking challenges: like time-zone changes. As Cyprus gains an hour (suddenly and unexpectedly), the time distance between us in India and our friends in Cyprus increases. We fret why our friends are late, and almost give up in despair, when one of them turns up with a reassuring smile.

We proceed with our work. On the first day of our twice-a-week meetings, we pair or group artists with artists and groups of artists with texts and impulses. This grouping is experimental, although it is bounded by who can be in which part of Cyprus at what time. We share ideas, and then discuss these impulses. On the second day of our twice-a-week meetings, we regroup to briefly nurture these ideas, and then separate into physical and virtual breakout rooms. After sharing an impulse such as this:

"Matla' means 'mad' in Bangla - and everyone who knows the river knows also that this name has not been lightly earned. But

those English town planners were busy men, who had little time for words and names. Oh, it was to be a grand place, this new capital on the banks of the mad Matla - it would lack for nothing. The Matla waited one year and then one more and yet another until five long years had gone by. And then one day, in the year 1867, it rose as if to a challenge and hurled itself upon Canning. In a matter of hours the town was all but gone, only the bleached skeleton remained."

- 'The Hungry Tide', Amitav Ghosh

Our artists play with their impulses, and they return with movement or speech or performance such as this:

<https://youtu.be/K6nC1eN1pak>

"The mesh of our roots catches silt, mud, debris from the water flowing by, stabilising the ground on which we have grown. In this way, we build the land, we earth the islands. And this construction presents a breaker to the semi-diurnal tide. With varying force the tides come knocking; we mangroves meet them, and send them away - baffled."

- 'Breath Carriers', Vicky Long

And we returned with this:



We observe, we watch, we create, we share, we discuss, we learn, and we create. Over the month and a half that we have been meeting, we have learnt much about each other, and we look forward to our next interaction as we create a tapestry of fragments that carry stories about the Sundarbans and about the Pedieos. In this way, art brings us closer together, and something beautiful emerges even from threat and destruction.

Art transcends divides, we are told. And so it is.

- Lav Kanoi and Vikram Iyengar

